War Era Story Project 2012

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Age: Not given

Memories of My World War II Experiences
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High Points

1. Awarded three battle stars for action on Guam, Leyte, and Okinawa
2. Awarded a bronze star medal for evacuation, under enemy fire, of wounded GI's on Guam
3. Survived a kamikaze plane attack on the ship *Henrico*
4. A member of the team escorting Ernie Pyle, (the famous war correspondent), when he was killed by a sniper on the island of Ie Shima

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, I went to an afternoon movie and returned home to learn about the Pearl Harbor attack. I wasn't sure at the time what all this meant to me, but I was to find out in the years to come. At the time of Pearl Harbor, I was a sophomore at Barlow High School, Barlow, Kentucky, and the only goal I had was to go ahead and finish high school, which I did.

For the next two years, I was doing the usual stuff that juniors and seniors do: playing basketball, dating, and even some studying. We also had many scrap iron drives, collecting a lot of scrap iron for the war effort. I do remember that during this period, wartime rationing began, which included gas, food and clothing.

I graduated from Barlow High School in June, 1943, too young to get in the service at that time, so another fellow by the name of Bill Tilley and I went to Detroit, Michigan to work. We went by train to Detroit, and you should have seen us when we got off the train. We were like lost balls in the high weeds. Everything was so different from what we were used to. The streets seemed to be a block wide. Anyway, I got a job at the Cadillac Corporation performing surface grinding on pistons destined for PT boats. Being away from home for any length of time, especially in a large city like Detroit, was quite an experience for me.

An event that took place while I was there stands out in my mind. It involved the race riots in Detroit that summer of 1943. It seems that in one of the amusement parks, Belle Island, some black people and white sailors got into an argument, and a riot spread all over town. It was kind of nasty; several people were killed or hurt. Although I didn't see any of it personally, for several days I had some apprehension going to and from work on my 3 to 11 p.m. shift.

Just before my 18th birthday, on September 21, 1943, I went from Detroit back to Barlow with the intention of joining the service, which I did. On September 22, one of my buddies from Barlow, Gene

Owens, and I volunteered to enter service, like everyone else was doing at that time. He and I stayed together until Fort Ord, California, as you will see later on in this saga. We were sent from Barlow to Ft. Benjamin Harrison, in Indiana, in October for mustering in. It was here that I got my first taste of K.P. (Kitchen Police), and I didn't like it a bit.

After a week or so there, we were sent to Ft. McClellan, Alabama, for six weeks of basic training. Ft. McClellan is an Army base at Talladega, Alabama, near Birmingham. Basic training was kind of tough, especially for a 129-pound eighteen-year-old right out of high school. I remember one night during training that we were out doing some exercises and it was raining hard. We were going through this training area to get over to where we were to crawl under some live machine gun fire. It was so dark we couldn't see a thing. I fell in to a hole that was over my head in depth and I thought I had broken my leg. But I didn't, and after I got up and found my rifle and helmet, I staggered away, and went on through the machine gun fire. I was pretty sore for quite a while after that. When we got back to the barracks, we were so covered with mud from head to toe, we walked directly into the shower, clothes and all. Also very vivid in my mind are the five, ten and fifteen mile hikes that we had to take with full field packs and rifles.

One of the things that I recall at Ft. McClellan was one weekend Mom and Dad drove down from Barlow and brought Gene's Mom and Dad to visit us. We had the weekend off and enjoyed it, but the six of us stayed in a motel room with only two beds! Yuck! Not very macho for two big-time soldiers. Gene and I had a good laugh about that years later.

At Ft. McClellan, we were trained as replacement troops. The intent was that those of us going through this program would go overseas to take the place of casualties, or to fill in wherever needed. By mid-December, 1943, we were finished with basic training and we thought we were ready for anything. Gene and I had a delayed route furlough, which meant that we could go to Barlow for two weeks and then report to Ft. Ord, California. We enjoyed the holidays that year in Barlow then caught a train out of Cairo, Illinois to Chicago. There, we had to change trains to pick up one going west. This was in January, and believe me, I found out in a hurry why it is called the “Windy City.” It was undoubtedly the coldest I had ever been as we changed stations. It was a long three-day train ride to California, but I thoroughly enjoyed seeing some of the Western states. It was here that I remember getting my first glimpse of real, live American Indians.

We finally arrived in San Francisco, where we were put on another train going south, down to Ft. Ord, which is near Monterrey and Salinas. Fort Ord was basically a staging area for all the Army and Marine personnel going over to the Pacific. It was here that Gene Owens and I got separated and didn't see each other for 2½ years. We didn't spend too much time there at Ft. Ord, probably because they were needing troops over in the Pacific, so back on a train we went, up to San Francisco.

From there, we went out into the San Francisco Bay to a place called Angel Island. Again, this was a holding area and we had to wait until there was a ship available for us. Angel Island is a little island right next to Alcatraz. While there, we were able get a one-day pass, so another eighteen-year-old-guy and I

went into San Francisco and spent a day and night. As I recall, there wasn't much to do, except sight-seeing. (We weren't very sophisticated, you know.)

Soon after that, we were put on a ship, sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge, and headed for Hawaii. In about two weeks, we wound up at Pearl Harbor, in Honolulu, disembarked, and got on a little narrow-gage railroad in open-top sugar cane cars. We went up to a camp outside Honolulu that was specifically a short term holding area to house people until they were shipped out or became replacement troops for some outfit. I did get to spend one day in Honolulu to look around, and I enjoyed that very much.

It was at this place that I called Jones Albert (my Uncle AI Warford) and his wife, Fran. None of the family had seen AI since before Pearl Harbor and none of us had ever met Fran. AI was in the army and was stationed at Scoffield Barracks at the time of Pearl Harbor. I went over to Scoffield to visit AI, and Fran came over and they took me to their home. I spent the night at their home which happened to be where Fran's parents lived. This was in a place called Wahiawa, which is on the other side of Oahu from Honolulu.

Anyway, getting back to this temporary staging area outside of Honolulu, several of us were assigned to the 77th Infantry Division, 305th Regiment, Headquarters Company, Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon. We were transported by truck and passed through Honolulu, on out to Pali Pass. This was quite an experience. It's hard for me to describe, but I'm sure this was the most beautiful scene I had ever witnessed up to that point in my life. We went over this big, tall mountain chain, looked down and there was the ocean about five miles off in the distance. The road to the bottom was just like an “S” curve all the way down. It was very impressive, at least to me. The 77th Division was based right at the foot of Pali Pass. This was where I was united with the main outfit that I was to be with during the time I was in the Pacific. While there, we did some training, though not much. As I recall, we did spend a lot of time over at the beach swimming and sunning. I also remember that I got blistered bad and was miserable for several days.

After a month or so, we were ordered to ship out from Hawaii. We were transported back to the Honolulu docks, boarded a ship and headed west. As I recall, we did not know exactly where we were going. Anyhow, we did pass by Midway and Wake Islands on the way out. We were all familiar with Wake Island from the stories we had heard on the newscasts. I remember I was surprised at how flat it was. Midway Island was the scene where our navy had met and defeated the Japanese navy in one of the greatest naval battles in history. You may have seen some of the movies made about this battle.

One night on this ship, a most unusual thing happened. As I was taking a shower, I stepped out, and who should I see but a fellow from Barlow. His name was Mahlon Harlan and, needless to say, we were both very surprised. Mahlon was in my brother Jim's class at Barlow High School. The odds against two people from a small town in Kentucky meeting like that must be fantastically high.

Our first combat landing was Guam, located in the Mariana Islands, and the date was near the middle of 1944. As we waited on the ship before going in, we watched our navy ships and planes shell and strafe the Island. We even saw one of our planes shot down by enemy “ack ack” (anti-aircraft) fire. I remember thinking that this is it, and wondering what in the world was I doing there. We went in by landing craft,

but we couldn't get all the way to shore because of the reef that surrounded Guam. So we had to wade in the ocean about fifty yards or so to get to the beach. In some places, the water came up to my neck. The beach was devastated by all the bombardment, but we went right on through and moved up to a hill about a half mile on shore, where we dug in for the night.

That first night, we were all scared to death. It seemed all our troops were shooting, as if the Japanese were right up on us, coming in at us. But they weren't. The next morning we found that there was an empty water truck down below the hill we were on, and that was what had drawn all the fire during the night. One of my platoon members got hit in the shoulder that night, and I don't believe he even got out of his foxhole. The second day in, we moved up about another mile, and again dug in for the night. It was here that we got a real taste of the weather on Guam. It started raining just after dark, and kept it up most of the night. The holes we were in filled up with water and made it impossible to get any rest. It was just a very, very miserable night.

Since I was in the regimental I and R Platoon (Intelligence and Reconnaissance), we were trained to do "recon" work; but on Guam, we didn't get to do much of that because the Island isn't very large, and we knew exactly where the Japanese were at all times.

After about a week or so on Guam, our regiment came upon a two-story brick church. The Japanese were hiding inside and defending it. We suffered a lot of casualties that day, and part of my platoon (including me) was ordered to go up to the church and bring out some of the wounded. I remember that four of us formed a team and went up close to the church. Then, while the firing was going on hot and heavy, we picked up a guy who had been wounded pretty badly. We put this guy on a stretcher and started going away from the church with him. Unfortunately, the Japanese could apparently see us from the short distance, and as we were carrying him out, we drew fire from the church. Fortunately, none of the four of us was hit, however, one of the guys carrying the end of the stretcher opposite me had a bullet pass thru his trousers and, ironically, hit the wounded man on the stretcher. We struggled for some time and finally got him out of there and back to the medics. We never heard if he came through it okay or not, but I expect not due to the extent of his injuries.

This went on all day and that evening late our platoon was ordered up to the perimeter of the church to dig in and support our other troops that were there already. Needless to say, that was not a very good night. The next day, the battle continued and toward late evening our troops, with tank support, were able to go in and flush all the Japanese out and take over the church. This was the first time that we had been that close to real action, and we got a pretty good taste of it there. The action that day was what later earned several of us a nomination for the Bronze Star Medal.

After the battle for Guam was over, and everything pretty much secured, we made camp and kind of hung out, if you will, for a period of time until we were needed for the next campaign. One of the interesting stories that came out of the Guam campaign was that an American soldier, who was there when the Japs invaded three years before, was found alive and he had been living there all these months while the Japs were in control. Ironically then, many years after the war was over, it was

reported that a Japanese soldier had essentially done the same thing: hid out and never captured by us during the campaign.

After we'd been there for some time, we received orders to pack up and get ready to ship out again. I don't remember the exact date, somewhere in August or September of 1944. We got back on a ship, again not knowing where we were going. It was destined to be a long ride. Rumor had it that we were headed somewhere for R&R (rest & recuperation). We headed south and went all the way down past the eastern coast of Australia. We stopped at New Caldonia in the south for a short period of time, but never did get off the ship.

It was about this time that we received word we were needed in the Philippines, and so we headed for Leyte, one of the Philippine Islands. All in all, we spent about thirty days on that one ship, feeling more like sailors as the days wore on. We arrived at Leyte sometime in October, 1944. The landing there was pretty much uneventful except for the Japanese planes that were trying to get to our ships out in the harbor. After we had gotten off the landing craft we were grouping up to head inland, and we watched as a group of Zero's (Japanese planes) came in and tried to get at our ships. We saw one Zero head for a ship, but a P38 came in right behind him and shot him down before he could do any damage. We were told that the pilot of the P38 was “Pappy” Boyington, one of our aces in the Pacific. I wasn't sure but thought someone was pulling our leg. We found out some time later that while, or just before, we were landing, there had been the big naval battle at what was called “Lingayen Gulf,” and that's pretty much when our Navy took over for good in the Pacific and really kind of knocked the Japanese navy out of the war. That was one of the last big naval battles in the Pacific war.

Because Leyte was so large, it was sort of a long, drawn out campaign. We had to do an awful lot of walking. We went through Armoc and several other towns and just continued to move forward pretty much the whole time. When we got down near the far end of the island, unfortunately, I happened to come down with a bad case of dysentery and had to be evacuated to the field hospital for about a week. I don't think I've ever been any sicker than I was during that period of time. After I got back to the regiment, we went on to the end of the island and spent Thanksgiving and Christmas down there. Then, by the end of 1944 the battle was pretty much over.

We made camp on Leyte for about a month or so, and during that period of time a group of us was sent over to the beach to help unload some ships. That was when I met Winthrop Rockefeller. I believe he was a major, and he was in charge of this whole shindig that day, getting the supplies off the ship and onto the beach. I was pretty impressed, because, as you may or may not know, Winthrop Rockefeller was one of “the” Rockefellers and was probably a millionaire a few times over. Yet here he was, like the rest of us, unloading a ship.

I should mention, at this point, that since my platoon was the I & R Platoon, we did have to do a lot of reconnoitering on Leyte because it was a much, much larger place than Guam, and we didn't always know where the enemy was. I remember distinctly that one day, my platoon was making a recon patrol and we came across a native farm house. Apparently the Japanese had heard us coming and were gone by the time we got there. But when a couple of us went into the house to look around, I found this

beautiful ivory inlaid hari kari knife, which turned out to be quite a souvenir. I brought it all the way home to Barlow and left it there when I went to college. When I looked for it later, it was gone. I don't know what could have happened to it, but apparently it got misplaced and lost in Barlow.

In early 1945 we left Leyte and boarded another ship, the *Henrico*, again not knowing exactly where we were headed. Our first stop was at the Karama Retto Islands, not far from Okinawa. Both are in the Ryukyu chain of Islands. This is where the Japs had a base of suicide boats and planes. They were not heavily defended, but we wanted to take them to protect our interests in the area. We pulled into the islands and sent groups to each island to take over. We stayed on shore all day and came back to our ships at night, and all the ships in the fleet went back out to sea at night.

We did this for a couple of nights, but on April 2,1945, our convoy went back out to sea and at about 6:00 or 6:30 PM we were attacked by a group of Japanese Kamikaze (suicide) planes. There was no warning because the planes were flying in low below the radar. It was after we had eaten dinner and I, along with several other of the troops, was on deck enjoying the night air. My first indication of the attack was, I heard a loud noise. I looked up just as the plane was hitting the ship in the forward superstructure, and at about the same time another plane dropped a bomb on the other side of the ship. Fortunately, I was standing under some landing craft that were stored above the forward loading hatch.

As you might expect, there were a lot of casualties, both navy and army personnel. I remember several of our group were killed, and I especially remember two of our radio operators, friends of mine, who were in the radio room at the time of the attack. The ship was completely dead in the water, no power or lights of any kind. Fire started below deck, and I'm not sure of anything else that happened below deck, since I was standing on the forward upper deck. After a short while, one of our destroyers pulled up alongside our ship and started pouring water on it to put out the fires.

Our ship (the *Henrico*) began to list rather badly and we were concerned for a while that we would have to abandon ship. My recollection is that three or four other ships had been hit that night, and I believe one of them was a destroyer. I don't remember if any of them were sunk, but they were all heavily damaged. I spent the night on the bow of the ship because there was nowhere else to go, and we were told to let the navy personnel take care of things. It was a very long night, believe me. Anyway, by the next morning a tug boat had come out from the nearby islands. The tug latched on to our ship and began pulling it back to shore.

After we got back into port that day, it was kind of a hectic time trying to account for everyone and assess the damage. I remember, also, that since we had no power, the food in the freezers was going to spoil, so some time later on that day they elected to distribute beer and ice cream to everyone who wanted it. It was a nice treat, but we would rather have done without it and not taken the casualties. The balance of the food was transported to other ships.

I can also remember that the next few nights there, we would sit on deck and watch as Japanese planes came over. It seemed as though every one of our ships in the harbor and shore batteries was throwing up anti-aircraft fire because the skies were just full, almost like a giant fireworks display. For the three

days we remained on that ship, we were transported twice daily by landing craft to another ship for our food and showers.

After this whole mess had straightened itself out, we were put on another ship and headed for Ie-Shima. This is a small island just off the coast of Okinawa. In fact this was about the same time that Okinawa was invaded. After a short trip we reached Ie-Shima and put landing craft ashore. I don't remember there being a lot of firing on the beach, but there must have been some. Maybe we were just getting used to it by then. We got off the ship and moved up close to the airfield, which was right up in the middle of the island on the main ridge. I remember Ie-Shima as being very similar in size and shape to lwo Jima, the island where the marines had such large casualties. Most of the fighting here was done at the end of the island where there was a mountain that had been created by volcanic activity.

There was severe fighting, but the casualties were not nearly as bad as on lwo Jima. I remember mostly our recons were limited to the caves that lined the shore. It was at these caves that our flame throwers were the most effective. Theyd just get up close, throw the flames in there and that would be about it. I remember one of the older guys in our company (he was about forty) who didn't seem to be afraid of anything. He had a habit of going out on his own to search for Japs. I remember distinctly one day that he came walking back into the area with about six Japs in tow that he had flushed out of the caves. The fighting there lasted only a week or so, after which we camped near the airport, about 1-112 miles or so from the beach.

It was there one day I was asked to take a recently captured Japanese soldier down to the beach area and pick up a wartime journalist by the name of Powell (or so I thought) and bring him back up to our area. As we were going along down the road to the beach, here I am all alone with this Japanese prisoner, when all of a sudden he started jabbering and talking in Japanese and making all kinds of gestures toward the trees beside the road. He started toward the trees and I hollered for him to stop, but he didn't. I was carrying an M1 rifle and I pulled it to my shoulder, ready to fire. After he got a short way into the trees, all of a sudden he pulled his pants down and squatted towards the ground. It was only then I realized what it was he'd been trying to tell me. He had to take a crap. It was also then that I came to realize that the Japanese were human after all.

Anyway, I got him down to the beach, left him at the area where they were collecting all the Japanese prisoners, and then started to look around for Ernie “Powell.” I started going up and down the beach but nobody seemed to know where he was. After searching for about a half hour I returned to our camp up near the airport. It was then that I found out someone else had brought him up and that his name was Ernie Pyle, and he was a noted journalist who visited the troops and wrote for the *Stars and Stripes* about military activity and personnel during the war. He was a very well-known person and was treated like a VIP. He stayed with us for a day and then had to return to Okinawa, from where he had come. My platoon, at least about six of us, was assigned to escort him down to the beach where he was to take a ship back over to Okinawa.

Four of us were in a Weasel, a tracked vehicle capable of going in the water or on the ground. There were three more guys, along with Ernie Pyle, who followed in a jeep. The road to the beach paralleled

the main ridge of the island, and we started following this road down. All of a sudden, machine gun bullets started zapping over our heads. We stopped the Weasel and took cover by the side of the road. Apparently, a Japanese machine gun had been overlooked when our troops took over this part of the island initially. We were pinned down for about 2 to 2½ hours before a tank was brought up and went up the hill and wiped out the machine gun.

After being cleared, we walked back about fifty yards to where the Jeep had stopped, and there we found that Ernie Pyle had, apparently, raised his head up out of the ditch he was in to see what was going on, and had taken a machine gun bullet through the head, right in front of his ear. He had been wearing glasses and one of our people had put his glasses back on his head. We were all very sorry that this had happened, especially since we were supposed to be escorting him back down to the beach. Still, there was nothing we could do about it. We later learned that a memorial of some kind honoring Ernie Pyle, had been built on that particular spot.

It was only a short time after this that we were ordered over to Okinawa, a short ride across the water. We were not part of the original landing. We went ashore and headed right up for the front line, across the island. We moved up to a line of hills opposite the city of Naha and settled in. In front of us was the main part of the Japanese force that had retreated to the heavily fortified area of the island. We watched for days as our artillery and aircraft bombed and strafed this part of the island. Keep in mind that Okinawa was heavily fortified by Japanese because this was a military training ground, and these guys knew what they were doing. The Japanese artillery kept pounding right back at us and very accurately. I remember one night they put shells so close to us that the hill literally shook all evening, and there were a lot of us shaking also. From our position during the day we could watch our planes bombing and strafing Naha. One day, right in front of our position, which overlooked a huge valley, where at one time there had been a small airplane landing strip, we watched as a marine Corsair airplane blew up and disintegrate right in front of us. Apparently, from what we could gather, the pilot had strayed into the path of an artillery shell. The battle for Okinawa was a long, drawn out campaign, and as I recall, it ended sometime in late June, 1945.

After the island was secured, we were ordered off Okinawa for return to the Philippines. This time we went to Cebu Island; but the trip back was kind of unusual in that this time we travelled on an LST (Landing Ship Tank), not exactly a cruise ship. Our stay on Cebu was relatively pleasant; our camp was right on the beach and we could swim pretty much whenever we wanted to. We were also able to get passes and go into Cebu City for recreation. There wasn't much to do, but it was a diversion. The one bad thing about Cebu that I remember was some of our guys wanted to kick up their heels a little bit and they got hold of some Philippine moonshine. It turns out that some of it was good and some of it was not so good, and several of our people either died or were sick from this bad whiskey. Our stay on Cebu was geared to planning and getting ready to invade Japan. We were certainly not looking forward to that. It was here that we first got word of the new “jet” plane that the U.S. had built, and also word about the Atomic Bomb that had been dropped on Hiroshima, and then Nagasaki. It was not long after that, that the Japanese surrendered, and a happier bunch of Gl Joes you have never seen.

In late August we were again on board ship, headed for Japan to serve as Occupation troops. When we arrived at Hokkaido Island, which is the northernmost island of Japan, we pulled into the harbor of a town called Hakodate. The most interesting part of this whole experience was, after we got off the ship that day(keep in mind that we were the first Americans to get to this part of Japan), we marched in formation up to the center of town, where the Japanese officials came out and surrendered to us. This was quite an unusual and interesting experience for all of us to witness.

After the ceremony was over, we boarded our trucks and drove up to just outside the city of Sapporo. You may remember that Sapporo was where the Winter Olympics of 1972 were held. Anyway, we moved into this vacated Japanese cavalry post and set up camp. Our stay here was good; we had little to do but pull guard duty and perform other small chores as needed.

One interesting thing here (to me at least) was that the Japanese farmers started bringing back the old cavalry horses that had been here before the war, and which they had been using for farming during the war. As it turned out, I was put in charge of the stables and my guys took care of the horses. When I say horses, some of them were pretty good and some of them were not so hot; but we did get a few of them in shape so that they were decent enough to ride. We searched out and rounded up some saddles and other equipment, and began to ride these horses. Since I was in charge, I just happened to get a decent horse for my own. We then started a riding service, so to speak, because all of our troops were allowed to ride the horses. This lasted until mid-December, 1945, when I had accumulated enough points to return home.

About mid-December, those of us with enough points to go home were escorted to a train in Sapporo for our trip to Yokohama. As we left Sapporo there were several feet of snow on the ground and it was very, very cold. Just one thing about this train that we were on: it appeared the car was of the 1900 variety, and there was no heat on it, so we had a most uncomfortable trip to the southern end of Hokkaido; but we didn't mind at all. We were on our way home!

At the southern end of Hokkaido we boarded a huge ferry boat for an overnight trip between the islands of Hokkaido and Honshu. When we got to Honshu the next morning, the train to which we were transferred was a little bit newer and better than the one down from Sapporo. As a matter of fact, it even had a little bit of heat in it. I don't remember the exact date that we departed from Yokohama, but do know that we were all quite happy to be returning to the good ole U.S.A.

The only significant thing I can remember about the trip home is that we encountered heavy seas on about the second day out. It turned out to be the tail end of a typhoon. I remember this one evening, we were standing in line for dinner, as usual. We had to go outside on the deck along the side of the ship to get from one hatch (door) to another, and the sea was so rough that we literally were up to our knees in the ocean. Also, we celebrated Christmas and New Years on this ship.

Our ship landed at San Pedro, California in early January, 1946. We went directly to a camp set up specifically for returnees from the Pacific, and stayed there for three or four days, waiting for a train to Ft. Knox, Kentucky. While there, we had the best food that we had eaten in over two years.

The day after we arrived at Ft. Knox, I went to a movie at the base theater. It was there that the most unexpected thing happened. While waiting in line for the movie, who should I see but Gene Owens, the Barlow buddy that I had gone into service with, and had not seen for 2½ years. We were both discharged from service on January 16, 1946 and, together, we went home to Barlow.

This concludes what I remember about the WWII years. I have not tried to cover every little thing that happened, just what I thought might be the most interesting to our family.

Sayonara!